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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 002002

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FOR G/TIP, INL, DRL, L/DL, NEA/RA, AND NEA/ARP, ECA/PE/V/R/N

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TAGS: PHUM ELAB KPMI PREL PGOV AE

SUBJECT: UAE Human Rights Association fractures while former association member/International Visitor Program grantee is assailed in local press for disloyalty

REFS:

- A) 06 ABU DHABI 790 (HR NGO)
- B) ABU DHABI 1542 (ACTION PLAN WITH MFA)
- C) ABU DHABI 1539 (ACTIVIST VOICES)
- D) ABU DHABI 151 (INFLUENTIAL WOMEN)
- F) ABU DHABI 1338 (POLICY TOWARD TRANSPARENCY)
- G) ABU DHABI 1539 (ACTIVISTS)
- H) ABU DHABI 1567 (DISMISSAL OF ACADEMICS)
- I) ABU DHABI 1619 (GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY)
- J) ABU DHABI 1869 (DEMOCRACY REFORM UPDATE)

Classified by DCM Martin Quinn for reasons 1.4 b and c

Summary

¶1. (C) Four out of seven board members of the only human rights association in the UAE resigned December 4, putting into effect a public welfare law that forced closure of the Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA). Disgruntled board members cited lack of transparency and intolerance for opposing views as reasons the nascent NGO has fractured and disintegrated. The unified protest is a deliberate act to manipulate federal organizational law and "clean house" in time for a fresh start in the Human Rights Association's upcoming January election. In a further development, a member of the association traveling to the U.S. to participate in an International Visitor "Democracy and Human Rights" Project had his computer searched at Dubai airport and became the target of a media campaign impugning his loyalty and sharply criticizing his "disgraceful behavior" for delivering "files and photos about labor rights in the UAE to foreign organizations." End Summary.

No Change in Status Quo

¶2. (C) While the establishment of the first-ever Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA) (ref A) in 2006 was in itself a step toward civil engagement (ref J), local Arabic daily Al Ittihad reported that there has been "no change in the status quo" according to Aisha Soltan, former vice chair and spokesperson for the four board members of the association. One board member who recently resigned, Dr. Ibtisam Al Kitbi (ref D), explained that the hope of the founding members was to give elected members a voice to represent their individual views. What she claimed instead to witness was a system where the voices of board members were muted by "the dictator who runs the association." Speaking candidly about the chairman of the association, Abdul Gaffar Hussain, Al Kitbi complained that meetings were held without elected members (ref F) and that decisions were finalized by Hussain and his secretary general, Dr. Mohammad Obaid Ghubash, without consultation. "How can I defend the rights of others if my own human rights are violated?" said Al Kitbi. In response, Hussain was quoted in the press as saying members who resigned "gave nothing to the association and failed to attend [its] meetings." Al Kitbi told PolOff that board members were not invited to meetings for the past 5 months. "We never took action solitarily and if they wished to object, they could have done so without trading accusations," countered Hussain in the Gulf News. Ghubash was quoted

as saying that board members could have reported their complaints to the Social Affairs Ministry which investigates wrong doers rather than tendering their resignations.

Reasons behind Resignation

¶3. (C) The four members who resigned, Aisha Soltan, Dr. Ibtisam Al Kitbi, Dr. Nisreen Morad, and Khalfan Mosbeh Al Muheiri, sent in coordinated resignations to protest alleged mismanagement of the association. Ms. Soltan told Al Ittihad that they had "no choice" but to resign since they saw a large volume of "transgressions and legal errors" inconsistent with the statute of the association and the Law of Public Welfare Organizations (NGOs). She went on to say that the group attempted to talk with the chairman and the secretary general on numerous occasions. No attempts were made to include the group as a whole, and decisions continued to be made without consultation and released as "unanimous decisions" by all elected members. Moreover, many of the decisions made in the name of the group were positions members either did not approve or had no knowledge of. Soltan added that the members who resigned thought of waiting until the normal general assembly elections in January, but the increasing discomfort led the group to feel that there was no recourse but resignation. (ref. H)

New Board in January

¶4. (SBU) Disgruntled founding members hope that a more harmonious board will be elected in January. They plan to run again for election, hoping this time that a new board will provide a fresh start to the now "crippled" association. According to Al Ittihad, Al Muheiri said that the current board cannot function and has been "practically paralyzed for many months." He said the current board has been inconsistent and has many problems and hopes resignations will force a change. Current resignations have been received by the

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Ministry of Social Affairs which has asked EHRA to provide an official letter explaining the situation, a formal step followed by the dissolution of the organization under the Law of Public Welfare Organizations which provides that if more than half of the board of directors of any organization resigns, the board is considered dissolved. This law applies to EHRA with four of its seven board members having resigned. Commissioner of the Ministry of Social Development, Naji Al Hay, told Al Ittihad when the official letter arrives from EHRA, an interim committee will be formed to run the organization until a new board is elected in January. Many of the organization's founding members are passionate about the organization, feel emotional about the decision to resign, and look forward to a fresh start in the upcoming term. Asked if they hope to run again, Dr. Al Kitbi told PolOff that she was warned not to run again, but responded that she most definitely will.

Case of former Association Member, I.V. grantee

¶5. (C) In a further development, Embassy has learned that Mr. Farouq Dehdar, a former member of EHRA and participant in an International Visitor Program "Democracy and Human Rights" Project, had his computer searched at the Dubai airport while on his way to the U.S. in mid-November. A former chair of the Labor, Naturalization and Residence Committee of EHRA, Mr. Dehdar was apparently suspected of transporting "files and photos about labor rights in the UAE to foreign organizations." Dehdar believes that a case is being constructed against him and alleges that the Ministry of Social Affairs has formed a committee to investigate. Emiraat Al Youm (Emirates Today) newspaper carried December 9 and 11 articles critical of Dehdar while the tabloid's blog carries numerous comments on the case. Dehdar told his I.V. program manager that he has been in touch with his lawyers in the UAE regarding the allegations.

¶6. (C) EHRA chairman told Emiraat Al Youm that Mr. Dehdar "does not represent the association." The Arabic paper goes on to recommend that Dehdar should stop "kissing ass by volunteering information to the United States" and that he would be better off reporting "negative comments" to the proper UAE authorities. UAE Minister of Social Affairs, Mariam Al-Roomi, is quoted in Al Quds Press Wire Service commenting that "the UAE will not hesitate to take tough

measures against those who attempt to distort the image of the country's noble works."

¶7. (C) Comment: Today's (December 13) Al Ittihad featured three editorial op-eds about Farouq Dehdar, castigating his "disgraceful behavior" and impugning his national loyalty. Embassy will conduct post-project interview with Mr. Dehdar following his return to the UAE o/a December 16, will monitor the situation, and report further developments.

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